DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 452 337 UD 034 164

| | |
|---|---|
| AUTHOR | Kuo, Elaine W. |
| TITLE | Apart and a Part: The Development of Individual and Group Identity of Asian American College Students. |
| PUB DATE | 2001-04-11 |
| NOTE | 35p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Seattle, WA, April 10-14, 2001). |
| PUB TYPE | Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150) |
| EDRS PRICE | MF01/PC02 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | *Asian Americans; College Environment; College Students; Cultural Background; Ethnic Stereotypes; *Ethnicity; Higher Education; *Self Concept; Student Attitudes |
| IDENTIFIERS | Critical Race Theory; *Identity Formation |

ABSTRACT

This study explored the identity development of Asian American college students, especially in relation to the simultaneous development of individual and group identity. It examined how second-generation Asian Americans interpreted their evolving sense of self in relation to race/ethnicity and how their racial/ethnic identity affected their college experience. This study was conducted at the University of California, Los Angeles. Students completed individual interviews that encouraged introspection and focused on how individuals make sense of various academic and social experiences. Overall, students struggled to find balance between their inner and social selves. Students' racial/ethnic perspectives affected how they interpreted reality. They had to deal with preconceived notions about their group identity, which affected their struggle with how they defined Asian American identity and their place in it. Tension between group affiliation and individuality affected both college choice and academic major selection because students did not want to be categorized by race/ethnicity. Connection at some level with their racial/ethnic identity helped students' sense of self in the larger context. Peer groups were important because the dialogue between friends reinforced or challenged notions of the self. Students placed high value on connecting with other Asian Americans in a social context because of the unspoken level of understanding. (Contains 34 references.) (SM)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 452 337

# Apart and A Part:
# The Development of Individual and Group Identity of Asian American College Students

Elaine W. Kuo
Higher Education & Organizational Change
Graduate School of Education & Information Studies
University of California, Los Angeles
Email: ekuo@ucla.edu

Presented at the Annual Meeting of the
American Educational Research Association
Seattle, Washington
April 11, 2001

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

E.W. Kuo

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

UD034164

## Introduction: Statement of the Problem

In recent decades, Asian Americans[1] have become an increasingly visible part of the student population at higher education institutions. Between 1984 and 1995, Asian Americans were the second fastest growing racial/ethnic group at the undergraduate (101.7%) and graduate (105.4%) levels and the fastest growing group at the professional school level (233.3%) (Hune and Chan, 1997). For many Asian American students, college is the time they begin to formulate their identity and sense of purpose for the first time (Bagasao, 1989). Some begin to recognize that they are members of a minority group that is often viewed monolithically and left out of the academic discourse of student experiences and college outcomes (Osajima, 1995). Thus, this study explores the identity development process for Asian American students in this context of marginalization. How do Asian American students construct and understand themselves both as individuals and as members of a minority group?

Although the college experience is a time for great opportunity and growth (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991), there is a dearth of research on the experiences and perceptions of Asian American college students because most research on minority populations center on the black-white paradigm (Chan and Wang, 1991; Osajima, 1995). In other words, there is limited knowledge on how Asian Americans perceive their college experience (Yee and Kuo, 2000; Thai, 1999). Specifically, less is known about how self-construction is formulated, influenced and clarified for Asian American students

(Kibria, 1999). Although Asian Americans currently make up about 3.5% of the general population, they compose 5.6% of the total college enrollment (Hune and Chan, 1997). As Asian American growth rates and enrollment patterns continue into the new millennium (Wang, 1993), it is important to help institutions recognize the issues and needs of this growing constituency because the increasing student diversity suggests that homogeneous treatment will shape Asian American students differently (Osajima, 1995). Thus, to maximize the impact of the college experience, higher education must provide a variety of services and opportunities to maximize the impact of the college experience for all their students.

Qualitative methodology allows the researcher to investigate informants' experiences and perceptions of reality, in this case, how Asian American students interpret and construct their identities in the context of their realities while in college (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). Such participatory investigation allows me, as the researcher, to discern how students perceive their emerging private and public identities as unique beings and as part of the Asian American population. By examining Asian American student narratives, this pilot project explores how their individual and group identities frame their college experiences (Marshall and Rossman, 1999; Riessman, 1993). Thus, I focus on how these students describe themselves and their interactions as they shape and create their college experience, via their academic choices and friendship selection. How do they select their academic major? Who are their friends? Specifically, I investigate their development of the inner self and group identity, the self as an autonomous agent and the ability to develop relationships with others (Baxter Magolda, 2000).

---

[1] Community leaders and scholars generally agree that the term "Asian American" is not to be hyphenated because it serves as a political perspective and not merely a descriptive tool (personal communication,

## Literature Review

The subsequent literature review helps frame the study of how Asian American students consider their own identities or their positionality in the context of the college environment. First, contemporary interpretation of the term "Asian American" will be explored. Then, perspectives on identity development that examine the notion of the private and public selves will be explored. Finally, I discuss aspects of critical race theory as a theoretical lens that sheds light on the impact of race, to better examine the behavior and experiences of Asian American students as they begin to define themselves as individuals and in relation to the larger society.

### The Asian American Construct

Until restrictions such as the Chinese Exclusion Act was officially lifted in 1945 and immigration quotas relaxed in 1965, Asian Americans were a disjointed and disparate group, one lacking political power and clout (Chan, 1991). During the Civil Rights Movement, Asian American students brought increased recognition, services and power through coalition building to their communities (Wei, 1993). Therefore, the term "Asian American" developed to represent the commonalties shared by the various ethnic groups and helped bridge people's common experiences of difference and exclusion while building a pan-Asian solidarity.

Ethnic and racial identity continues to play a large role in the Asian American college experience. Despite their increased presence and participation, especially on the coasts, contemporary issues such as the model minority myth continue to challenge the

---

Tuyet Le, 4 June 2000; personal communication, Don Nakanishi, 17 May 2000).

participation levels of Asian Americans in today's society. For example, although they may be better educated than whites, Asian Americans continue to be underpaid in equivalent occupations (Barringer, Takeuchi and Xenos, 1990). Asian American undergraduates are affected on many levels by persistent stereotypes that force students to choose between their individual identity or group image (Bagasao, 1989). How an Asian American student responds to this pressure between the self and the group impacts academic and social decisions.

Current Asian American students may not subscribe to the agendas of their Civil Rights predecessors because many of them are children of post-1965 immigrants. Thus, the term "Asian American," as it originally was created and defined, may no longer be acceptable to this generation of students. As a construct generated by students in the late 1960s, "Asian American" is meant to emphasize one's American citizenship and is not a racial category or a specific ethnic group. In fact, this term exists as a sociopolitical entity, promoting a collective identity as Americans (and not foreigners) among a disparate group of people from various countries and different socioeconomic classes, who ultimately have very little in common. For example, a Cambodian refugee has different perspectives and experiences in America compared to a fourth generation Japanese American. However, because higher education and larger society classifies and treats people of Asian ancestry as a monolithic group (Osajima, 1995), it is important to understand how the students themselves. For example, what does the term "Asian American" mean for this generation of students? In what ways do words capture this group affiliation?

**Theories of Identity Development**

The impact of the college experience on students continues to be an area of great research interest. Many scholars have offered various perspectives of understanding the development of traditional college-age students (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1993). One often explored component is the balance between independence and intimacy (Erikson, 1969). Students are expected to use their college experience as an opportunity to become their own person while developing social and collaborative skills. As students undergo this process, higher education have viewed these goals as separate rather than integrated (Baxter Magolda, 2000). By shifting this paradigm, educators can consider how the college environment can help students begin to think about themselves and themselves in relation to others simultaneously.

The social identity model is one approach that considers the interchange between the personal, private identity and the public group identity (Tajfel, 1982). The inner and social self are interrelated and group association is believed to affect personal identity, which in turn shapes future decisions about group membership (Applebaum, 1998). For example, Asian American students' reaction and interpretation of the model minority image will depend on their own experiences and beliefs about this perception. Because such exchanges do not occur in isolation, an exploration of peer interaction is needed. The choices Asian American students make in college reflect their perception of what it means to be Asian American.

Kegan's (1982) five-order theory of self-evolution suggests that individual development vary in direction and magnitude and can be represented by a fluid helix design. For college students, Kegan's third order focuses on developing mutuality or the ability to enter into meaningful relationships with others. As this sense of self is mutually

constructed, Asian American students may allow the opinions of their classmates create pressure to behave in specific ways. For example, an Asian American student may decide on a science-oriented major for fear of obliging a stereotype. Kegan's fourth order emphasizes self-identity as an internal process and one's interaction with others becomes a source for insight and reflection. At this level, Asian American students may begin to create their own definition about what it means to be Asian American. However, the interplay between the public and private selves needs to be fully explored through a racial/ethnic perspective.

**Critical Race Theory**

Emerging from the work of Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman, critical race theory (CRT) examines how race has become an ingrained part of American culture (Delgado, 1995). Although CRT is rooted in a legal perspective, there are components of this framework that are helpful in understanding how race still shapes Asian Americans' self-perceptions. How Asian Americans are portrayed, as a group, will create an image that individuals will rebel against or attempt to emulate. Additionally, interactions with others will further shape Asian American students' ability to define themselves as individuals and as part of the larger group. However, this public identity is constructed by the dominant culture and results in dissonance within the private self especially if one's experiences contradicts this image. CRT contends that legal assurances of equitable treatment do little to address the informal aspects of racism and neglects the inextricable ties between race, gender, class, religious affiliation and sexual orientation. It is the intersection of these individual characteristics that will help formulate one's worldview. While some scholars have argued to the contrary, race continues to be a

salient part of the American experience as evidenced through the continued existence of racial affiliation. Critical race theorists argue that if our society were truly race-blind, racial designations would be insignificant and not affect the daily lives of individuals.

Currently, the meaning of race continues to be defined by the mainstream culture, against which other groups are judged and ranked. This racial hierarchy has great impact on individual identity because this group placement can create barriers for growth and opportunity. The assumption that Asian American behavior or traits can be essentialized creates dissonance for those who want to challenge this belief. For example, the model minority myth suggests that race is no longer a factor for Asian American success, yet the image of the studious, hardworking Asian American student establishes guidelines for accepted behavior. This representation of Asian Americans shapes individual identity development because behavior or beliefs outside of this so-called norm are considered deviant. Although this stereotype at times is supported by those inside and outside of the Asian American communities, this image denies the possibility that Asian Americans experience discrimination (Chang, 2000). As a result, Asian Americans are silenced because they have achieved "success" and, consequently, other subordinate groups are portrayed as deficient. Both actions serve to support the American meritocratic myth and devalue the salience of race, which CRT argues still exists.

## Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore the identity development of Asian Americans, especially in relation to the simultaneous development of individual and group identity. I specifically focus on second-generation Asian Americans (the first

generation to be born in the United States; see Chan, 1993 for further definition) because research indicates that the cultural gap between the immigrant and native-born generations may create dissonance in how students' perceive themselves in relation to their college experience (Zhou and Banks, 1998; Nakanishi and Nishida, 1995). As a result, the college experience may become a main source of support in clarifying a second-generation Asian American student's identity. Additionally, very little attention has been paid thus far to the subjective experiences of second-generation Asian Americans (Thai, 1999). Thus, the following research question is posed:

**How do second generation Asian American college students interpret their evolving sense of self in relation to race/ethnicity?**

The students I spoke with use the term "ethnicity" and "race" almost interchangeably, however, both terms have had a variety of definitions attached to them at any given time. "Race" describes biological and physical characteristics, while "ethnicity" emphasizes cultural heritage and attributes (Brodkin, 1998).

My interest in the relationship between race/ethnicity and identity development leads to a sub-question:

**How does second generation Asian American students' racial/ethnic identity affect their college experience?**

This question reveals how students perceive their opportunities through their particular standpoint as an Asian American. I am interested in discovering if the academic pursuits and friendship patterns of second generation Asian Americans reflect their concepts of race and ethnicity.

## Methodology

As students discuss their experiences with me, I focus on how they develop their conceptualization of the self. This section describes the participants and the rationale for selecting them. Because this study involves human subjects, the researcher's role must also be discussed (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). A basic description regarding the data collection process is also presented.

### Setting

This study was conducted at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), a large, public institution in an urban setting with a diverse student population of over 34,000. In addition to location and population demographics, UCLA has the highest number (not percentage) of Asian American students enrolled in the country (personal communication, Nakanishi, winter 1998). Thus, this site is an excellent setting to explore how Asian Americans students formulate their self-perception in a setting where there are opportunities to connect with others with similar and dissimilar backgrounds.

### Participants

Within this environment, I focused on four second-generation Asian American undergraduate students. I tried to select participants who represented different Asian ethnic groups so that some of the diverse perspectives and experiences of Asian Americans were reflected. These students, referred to me by other students I already knew, were contacted after they expressed interest in participating in my project. Three men and one woman were interviewed individually for approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Anonymity was guaranteed through the use of a pseudonym selected by each student.

The participants were as follows:

| Name | Gender | Age | Ethnicity | Year in School | Major |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Russell** | Male | 19 | Korean | Second | Computer Science |
| **Sonny** | Male | 20 | Filipino | Third | Physiological Sciences/Business |
| **Peter** | Male | 21 | Chinese | Fourth | Electrical Engineering |
| **Emerson** | Female | 21 | Chinese | Fourth | Women's Studies |

**Researcher's Stance**

Qualitative research never claims to be objective (Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman, 1993). The purpose in recognizing my preexisting interests is to examine how these beliefs may affect the study. This awareness will not only establish a self-monitoring mechanism at every stage of this study but will allow the reader to understand my own perspective.

My interest in exploring how Asian American students understand and describe the connection between themselves and their college experience stems from my perception of how college shaped my own ethnic identity. My understanding of the sociopolitical impact of being Asian American emerged from my participation in various campus political activities. This experience also led me to notice how race affected my daily life. Situations where my American citizenship have been challenged or when I've been told to "go back to where you came from" have left me very aware that my race creates expectations and beliefs that I am the "other," one whose place in this society is regarded with some suspicion. In this backdrop, I learned to assert my individual identity while challenging perceptions of my group affiliation.

Given my background, I need to constantly be aware of my consequential presence throughout the data collection process because it is not possible to remain

neutral, completely detached, and independent from my observations and interviews (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995). By being alert to this role, I will be aware of my influence and how my positionality affects the data analysis process.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The questions in this research focus on how individuals make sense of the events and experiences in their daily lives as they move through the dynamics of agency and communion. The emphasis is on how students define themselves based on their perceptions and interpretations (Emerson et. al., 1995). This method captures the richness in how students construct and formulate their reality.

Interview responses were analyzed using narrative analysis based in grounded theory (Bogdin and Biklin, 1998; Creswell, 1994). The interviews, lasting from 60 to 90 minutes, were tape-recorded, transcribed and reviewed. The questions used were from a semi-formal protocol that encouraged introspection and stories regarding various academic and social experiences. Participants were asked to describe themselves and discuss the influences on their academic major choice (see Appendix A for protocol). To establish proper data analysis, I also shared the transcripts with the participants and asked for their reflections and thoughts on our conversations. Meanwhile, I reviewed our conversations, identifying recurring ideas, language, beliefs, and behaviors to link racial and ethnic identity to self-perception. Additionally, I examined how this process shaped the students' college experiences. All the themes were generated during this coding process and helped sift the information.

## Findings

The findings presented here are drawn from interviews with four current undergraduates at UCLA. The second generation Asian Americans' narratives present information on how they are formulating their identities in relation to their race and ethnicity. The main emerging theme dealt with how the students viewed themselves and how they perceived others viewed them. This struggle to find the balance between the inner and social selves occurred for all the students. However, this tension varied for each person and the implications of this dynamic affected his/her interpretation of the choices made in college. The second emerging theme considers how the students' racial/ethnic lens affected their college experience. Academic decisions and friendships patterns are two sub-categories where the self-construction process is considered.

### Asian and American? The Inner and External Self

Although the students did not overtly comment on their minority status as Asian Americans, they faced a shared dilemma of defining themselves within a group context. In other words, they focussed on how they saw themselves as the self and the other. Most students found that their own definitions of these two constructs were not compatible and the fluidity between their individual and group identity was not always clearly evident. Their narratives demonstrate how they perceived this tension. For Peter, there was dissonance between his Chinese heritage and American culture that, at times, seemed illogical. The disconnect he experienced between his personal interaction at home and in college also reflected how he viewed ethnicity in relation to his self-concept.

> It's more like essentially wearing hats, I guess. If you wear a different hat for different occasions. I guess you could like combine the two [pause] but I don't know, for me, it seems like something would have

> to give. It'd be like western Chinese food. It has the façade of [being] Chinese but deep down, it's like really American.

This perception appeared to dichotomize the Asian and American selves and, for Peter, the two cultures were seen as distinct entities, with differences in values and beliefs. His comments reflect the reality of multiple self-conceptions and their role in different social settings. In this case, it appears that perception of group identity was formulated by traits and characteristics that Peter believed were unique to being Chinese or American. For example, when asked what he meant by "being more American," Peter noted specific traits (e.g. speaking up); however, these traits were placed in context of being exclusive to Americans and not shared by Asian Americans. Therefore, as critical race theory suggests, race/ethnicity, as an embedded feature in our society, continues to play a crucial role in providing fixed guidelines for acceptable group behavior and any tension is interpreted as incompatibility.

Although developing one's autonomy is a crucial component to development (Chickering and Reisser, 1993; Kegan, 1982), Peter viewed this transformation as distancing from his ethnic culture. In other words, by asserting his independence from his parents, he was becoming more American and less Chinese. Therefore, there were two emerging group identities. Peter appeared to maintain the balance between his different selves by keeping them separate and bounding them in specific contexts. This dynamic reveals his reliance on interpersonal interactions to define the self (Kegan, 1982). Therefore, his identity in each setting shifted based on the expectations of others around him (e.g. he could be "more American" at UCLA). As he developed confidence

in his personal identity, he began to question aspects of his group affiliation. Thus, he considered the mixed messages he received at home and in college.

> This is something Chinese families do, so you have to do it. Or that's the ways we do things. No, it's not! That's the whole point. That's what we're learning [in college], that you can actually make your own decisions, start stepping out and that [pause] you don't really have to forget all that stuff that your parents went through, you know. You can still learn about it and I guess honor it through that.

In describing himself, Peter placed his identity on a spectrum that would allow him to identify with both aspects (Swingewood, 1998). Because culture moves as a fluid entity and is not necessarily defined by rigid boundaries (Bakhtin, 1981), Peter commented on maintaining his link with his group identity as a Chinese American.

> Essentially, I guess what shows on the outside is American but I can also related to the whole Chinese experience. (What do you mean by relating to the Chinese experience?) How to act, stuff like that, know where people are coming from. I guess for me, that doesn't really leave me.

In his attempt to separate from certain aspects of Chinese culture, Peter seemed to accept his automatic membership in the Chinese community. The tension appeared to lay in his efforts to balance his perceptions of what seemed to be two distinct identities. Therefore, even though he may seem more "American" to others, he knew he was multilayered because of his perspective as an Asian American, privy to Chinese customs and habits.

The students in this study reflect the complex process of defining self-identity, and they tried to create a consistent self-image with how they viewed themselves and how they believed society expected them to behave (Chang, 1995). Through various personal

experiences, Russell also believed that society's perceptions often clashed with his own and this dynamic created dissonance.

> It seems to me like from my experiences that some white people tend to think they're better than like all the races. [In the dorms] there was a white clique and they were [pause] patronizing. They would kind of shut you out as if you weren't good enough or something. So, I don't feel really quite American.

In addition to the tension he experienced in asserting himself as an individual in the larger society, he also felt isolated with how other Korean Americans defined their ethnic identity.

> I have this awkwardness around Koreans in general just because most of them know how to speak Korean. Their parents speak Korean and they'll speak Korean to me and I'll just be like, yeah, I don't really speak Korean well. And they'll be like, oh, how come? You should learn Korean. It's such a pity to see kids who don't know their own language. I always hear that.

Again, there was disconnect between the expectations of others based on his Asian appearance and his own experiences. It was difficult to balance one's own emerging sense of self without losing connection to others. For Asian American students, they needed to establish their autonomy in relation to the dominant society as well as to the sub-population group to which they belong. Russell's story demonstrates how his sense of self was heavily influenced by his inability to develop meaningful relationships with certain groups of people (Kegan, 1982). The peer pressure he experienced translated into his uncomfortable feelings when around whites and Koreans. This need to form solidly defined relationships was especially evident for Russell, whose parents' divorce, seen as unusual in many Asian American communities, may have prevented him from

establishing a clearer sense of what it meant to be Korean. As a result, Russell struggled to create his own unique Asian American identity after not being able to feel a connection between what others perceived as being American or Korean.

> I want to be able to speak my language and retain some of my culture... I guess I don't feel like I know enough and to be Korean, you know your culture, your background and where you came from.

Language facility seemed directly linked to a stronger connection with ethnic identity and without it, Russell seemed to be even more isolated, in his mind, not fully American, not fully Korean (also noted by Peter). Again, the expectation of the group identity seemed to inform notions of the private self and, for Russell, it determined how he felt about his public identity as a Korean American (Tajfel, 1982).

Although the dichotomy of being Asian and American was a common theme, two of the students seemed to have a stronger internal perspective. They seemed to perceive the development of an Asian American construct as a separate identity, one that did not simply depend on the stir-and-mix approach to their American and Asian heritages. This self-perception seemed to generate less dissonance between the interpersonal and intergroup selves. Although Sonny noted the difficulty in retaining his Filipino identity while living in America, he seemed to have created an internally defined understanding of this reality.

> I think a little bit of tradition's lost every generation if you're in a different nation. I have that upbringing of my parents, a lot of traditional stuff but yet I'm here, so I have a lot of American stuff. But my kids, they're farther away from the people who actually moved here and so they'll even be farther off from being totally Filipino...there's nothing you can do about it.

Despite what the students perceived as clear distinctions between being American and Asian, they were beginning to find ways to connect the two constructs for themselves. As suggested by Kegan's (1982) fourth order, students like Sonny were creating his own construct about being Filipino American to help better define their inner self. Understanding this aspect of their identity (as defined by both their phenotype and citizenship) hinged on the students' interpretation of the self as a reflexive being, moving between their idealized self and the reality of their experiences.

Being an American of Asian descent was not definitive enough; one also needed to connect with the experiences of others within your ethnic/racial group. Sonny explained how this exposure would create better self-understanding and delineate the difference in perspective between him and his parents.

> Just being in a different country and a different nation, it's just so hard to really keep what you are. You tend to be influenced by everyone here and what's going on here. [Ethnic] studies take people back to their roots, back to where they're from and I understand that. That's where you understand more people and if you can understand your parents, how they were born and how they were raised, then you can kind of see, what they're trying to give you.

Thus, learning about the past experiences of other Asian Americans helped establish a better context to relate their own experiences.

Defining one's sense of self, of seeing oneself as a distinct individual, included challenging preconceived notions of others. The students in this study discovered that they needed to shatter group membership myths, stereotypes about being Asian American. Emerson noted,

> When I moved to LA, people had the impression that I was pretty

> white-washed. But the funny thing is that I speak probably better Chinese than any of them. And that really got on my nerves... I don't feel like perpetuating myths about Asian people, from simple things, like driving a Civic to hanging around with Asian people all the time.

In using the term "white-washed," Emerson expressed a common concern that she appeared "too American." On the other hand, she also seemed afraid of being seen as being too exclusively Asian. Although it is interesting to consider how the collective entity of Asian Americans seemed to be defined on superficial traits rather than a more theoretical, political grasp of being a minority in American society, these Asian American students faced a conundrum of looking Asian without expressing too many Asian-perceived qualities or American-attributed values. Emerson's story demonstrates the salience of race and how current Asian American students sometimes battle against the essentialist nature of group membership.

These experiences of working with an externally imposed definition of what are appropriate behavior and beliefs for Asian Americans left students resistant to simple self-description. However, this tension between the perception of the self by the other can help situate one's identity. For Emerson, interaction with others, while reinforcing her differences, made her much more comfortable with herself and reinforced her standpoint. She explained, "With a different group of friends, it almost validates your own identity. It makes you constantly think." Again, this comment demonstrated the effect that the experiences of the public self can have on the inner self (Applebaum, 1998) and how one's interaction with others becomes a source for insight and reflection (Kegan, 1982). As she attempted to define her identity as an Asian American, Emerson still dealt

with the perceived limitations of this term and how these boundaries restricted her own personal identity.

> Being Asian American at UCLA really makes no difference. And since I don't want to be one of the masses, I have to do more to get myself out of the masses. By doing that, I'm in women's studies, [by wanting] to be in entertainment...cause being Asian American is being different from any other minority. When you look at Asian Americans, there's no role models or anything for us. And so, we're kind of invisible.

The restraint or fluidity of culture can be seen as an inevitable part of the second generation Asian American experience. Having exposure to both Asian and American traditions, through their immigrant parents and native culture, left Asian American students without a lot of guidance in establishing their own perspective. While students never felt negatively about being Asian, they could clearly verbalize some of the perceived limitations of being Asian in America. Sometimes they used these externally based beliefs to help shape their own evolving sense of self in order to demonstrate their uniqueness or individuality. At other times, students still relied on others to define themselves (Kegan, 1982). Therefore, it was very important to be seen as a distinct, unique individual, despite the apparent group affiliation as an Asian American. Although these students wanted to be seen as autonomous beings, separate from their ethnic/racial identities, they tried to negotiate the effect these public perceptions had on their inner self. The tension between forming one's own individuality amidst developing connections with the group collective, was an indelible aspect of the construction of these students' identities.

**Ethnic Identity and College Experience**

While examining some of the decisions made by these four second generation Asian American college students, their self-perceptions seemed to be interpreted through an ethnic/racial lens. This finding suggested that ethnic identity, along with group identity, was clearly shaped by external perceptions and internal beliefs. This second theme that emerged examined how academic decisions and friendship choices reflect the transitional state of these Asian American students' identities. Specifically, the students' reflections about their college experience demonstrated the tension between their personal self-concept and group identity. While it was difficult to determine if ethnic identity determined decision-making or vice versa, the more vital finding was that the two appeared to be interrelated. This argument belied accepted notions that Asian American students, especially those after the immigrant generation, would have transitioned more successfully into dominant American culture (Thai, 1999). In fact, each student was forced to fashion their own meaning and implications about their ethnicity/race in order to preserve their own sense of individuality. Therefore, as critical race theorist noted, skin color continued to affect internal beliefs and perceptions, which in turn, contributed to the interpretation of the resources students utilized to help them make decisions.

**Academic Choices**

Regardless of their ethnic/racial background, college created a unique opportunity for these students for growth and development because living away from home for the first time forced them to make their own decisions. Regardless of whether they embraced or feared this initial independence, students recognized that they would be responsible for themselves as they negotiated the college environment. This developing sense of agency allowed them to shape their own identity as independent young adults. However, their

perspective as members of a minority group affected these students. For example, Russell's experiences of being excluded by other Korean students in high school for not being Korean enough led him to perceive that Korean Americans tended to self-segregate and be too clannish. As a result, he used this externally derived belief and used this scale to establish his own standards.

> I figured UCLA would be more diverse [compared to UCI]. I don't really mix well with other Asians, especially Koreans, because a lot of Asians, they had this whole Asian pride thing and I was kind of turned off by that too. Like they would always say, how come you don't have any Korean pride?

Because Russell believed he was incompatible with other Korean Americans, his independence could not be defined by this group identity. Therefore, when making his college choice, he was consciously seeking out what he hoped would be a more diverse setting, allowing him to interact with different types of people. "UCI was all Asianish, always Asian people go there." The decision to attend UCLA reflected the active effort for Russell to establish his own identity beyond just being Korean American.

The resistance at being labeled based on group identity also impacted the academic major selection process. In essence, this decision was another opportunity to assert one's independence. Emerson's decision to become a women's studies major reflected how she saw herself on the fringes between being Asian and American and how she struggled to fit into both identities.

> Like I'm just multilayered, that I can't be categorized, that I can't be typical. [pause] I go beyond the call of duty and I stand out. I start off being the outsider, but then I stand out because of my achievement... in order to prove myself within that peer group.

In her attempt to challenge these externally based stereotypes, she seemed to interpret negative beliefs about conformity and similarity that, ultimately, she was still being driven by these external definitions. Emerson recognized the existence of the Asian American construct as a collective identity but struggled with defining herself in relation to the group context. The Asian American label conjured up images of homogeneity and this picture contradicted Emerson's sense of herself as an individual, a unique heroine in her own story (McAdams, 1993). She continued perceiving herself as being unique, an Asian American who could not be categorized. Thus, she was influenced by the fact that, "there's not a lot of Asian Americans in women's studies at all [chuckles]." Therefore, her decision was focussed on accomplishing the atypical, the unexpected, at least what she believed was unexpected, for Asian American women. In this way, the determination of the academic major also shaped one's interpretation of the Asian American construct.

**Friendship Patterns**

Although the students' friendship patterns continued to highlight the dynamics between group and individual identity, it reinforced the influence ethnic identity played in this decision process. The social interactions demonstrated how group inclusion still was vital for students as they were defining their emerging private identity. For Asian American students, this development was a complicated process because group identity focussed on acceptance by mainstream and Asian American peer groups. Maintaining this balance helped better define oneself (Kegan, 1982). As Emerson noted, associating solely with other members of the same ethnic group was seen as a limitation.

> To me a lot of Asian Americans get stuck in an Asian American world. They have blinders on and unless a hate crime or something happens directly to them, it doesn't occur to them that they're even Asian American.

> (So what is living in an Asian American world?) Going to college, getting a job, getting married, that whole career path. It's become so mainstream because a lot of Asian Americans don't believe that racial prejudice still exists because they hang out with people exactly like them.

This sentiment demonstrated the importance Emerson believed that having a wide-variety of friends continued to maintain her racial perspective, to remind her that, as an Asian American, she was a minority member of society. However, it also demonstrates how certain traits and behaviors become internalized and associated with an entire group. While it is a myth that attending college and achieving gainful employment is Asian American-specific behavior, Emerson is beginning to vocalize the problematic nature defining oneself beyond expectations dictated by group membership.

Despite the insistence on the importance of having diverse friends, all the students cultivated friendship circles composed of people from their racial or ethnic group. Although Emerson purposefully sought out friends from other backgrounds, she still remained a committed member of her Asian American sorority. She noted that as a sorority member, she discovered "true sisterhood." When asked if she believed her experiences would have been different in a mainstream Greek sorority, she replied, "I wouldn't have found the deep relationships that I found in my own sorority."

Like Emerson, Sonny's ethnic identity and sense of Filipino culture led him to connect with and become a member of the Filipino club at UCLA. Even though he claimed that race/ethnicity did not determine his friendship choices, these relationships were established because race/ethnicity often determined how one's experiences were interpreted. Thus, students coming from similar cultural contexts would understand each

other's perspectives much easily. Not surprisingly, Sonny found a level of comfort in seeking out Filipino friendships (Atkinson, Morten, and Sue, 1989).

> It's kind of nice, when you hang [with] people that are the same background, same nationality as you. I've gone out with a lot of different girls and I notice that when I'm with a Filipino girl, there's just a lot of mutual understanding. You don't have to explain anything.

The mutual understanding, to some extent, did shape his perceptions about the value of having friends of similar ethnicity.

Friendships helped crystallize the possibilities in navigating the college environment. For Peter, he relied on friendship circles to form support networks for himself in the new college environment. Moving away from home was a "humbling experience," because he was moving beyond his close network of friends from high school. Ultimately, this experience affected his friendship choices in college and he noted that that his friends have became more predominately Asian, primarily because of his involvement with an Asian American Christian fellowship.

> Because I didn't have that foundation with family, I would have to make a whole new one, right? It would just naturally start from what I knew of myself. I'm Asian, so I'll try to find people who are more Asian or Asian like me. They see I'm Chinese or I'm Asian and they're Asian, maybe it'll set them at ease a little bit more...just being able to relate in just that aspect.

This sense of familiarity was a source of comfort for him as he struggled with his choice of major. His decision to respect his parents' wishes and remain in electrical engineering reflected a common experience of some Asian Americans (Bagasao, 1989). However, his friends helped him maintain his own perspective despite this experience. Thus, they

helped nurture and sustain Peter's sense of self. Through his friends' encouragement, Peter began relying on his internal sense of self to make meaning out of his life.

The friendships formed in college provided the opportunity to connect deeply with others and, in turn, these relationships contributed to the students' emerging identities. Having friends of the same race/ethnicity validated the students' own experiences and reinforced self-acceptance (Kibria, 1999). As minority group members, these relationships demonstrated the how the group identity, which can serve as a tension point in identity development because of its essentialist expectations, also can unify individuals in meaningful relationships that help bridge the inner and public selves.

## Conclusions

This exploratory study highlights the complexity of Asian American identity development as these four students negotiated their emerging personal and group identities. Even at an institution like UCLA, where the Asian American student population has reached critical mass, the racial/ethnic perspective continues to affect how reality is interpreted. Through the students' stories, there is a range of experiences demonstrating the difficulty in bridging notions of the public and private self, especially if your self-perception is at odds with how others perceived you. For example, Peter sees two discrete personas that he would adopt depending on the context. With his family, he would act more "Chinese," and while at college, he believed he could behave more as a (white) "American." While he felt more "American," Peter is still trying to reconcile the Chinese identity into a more singularly constructed definition.

The students also deal with preconceived notions and expectations about their group identity and this external pressure affected their struggle with how they define the "Asian American" identity and their place in it. In Emerson's story, she was aware of the Asian American stereotypes and actively tried to challenge them. Critical race theory suggests that stereotypes of Asian Americans enter the students' self-understanding as each person strives to be seen as a unique being. This tension between group affiliation and individuality affected both college choice and academic major selection because students did not want to be categorized simply based on their race/ethnicity.

Part of the college experience demands increased self-reliance; however, these Asian American students had to relate to their group identity in order to better understand themselves. In other words, connection at some level with their racial/ethnic identity helps add to their sense of self in the larger context. Therefore, the role of peer groups is especially important because the dialogue between friends reinforces or challenges notions of the self. Thus, the students interviewed place a high value of the ability to connect with other Asian Americans in a social context because there an unspoken level of understanding exists between them. Sonny and Russell each spoke about the impact of ability or inability to form these connections within their racial/ethnic group. The desire to be included and accepted in a larger group context shapes the development of the inner self because until the students felt this group connection, it is difficult to explore their own goals and desires. College becomes an instance where these connections can be made and Asian American students can explore their multiple identities.

**Limitations**

This study focussed solely on four second-generation Asian American students and although my findings took the unique characteristics of my informants into consideration, they are only four perspectives. Additionally, these students may have only begun to reflect on their college experience and may not be able to elucidate influences and expectations affecting their decisions and choices. Age may have affected student responses as well. The older students were able to comment more clearly on their experiences. Because I did not pointedly inquire about the impact of ethnicity/race on the college experience, it is possible that richer data could be gathered if more specific questions were asked. Also, most of the students discussed their experiences from an ethnic, rather than pan-Asian perspective. As a result, it is possible that the term Asian American has less meaning for this generation of college students. This study was an exploratory effort and the complexity of the Asian American population suggest that future studies should be conducted on students from various ethnic and class backgrounds, geographic locations, as well as across immigrant and native-born experiences. Despite the limitations, this study does examine the perceptions of these Asian American students at this point in their lives by demonstrating the continued relevance that race/ethnicity plays for Asian American students.

**Potential Contributions**

This investigation argues for the salience of race in the lives of Asian Americans. In our society, race continues to be relationally constructed. As demonstrated with the model minority myth, this image idealizes Asian Americans and is upheld as a goal for

people in and outside of the Asian American communities. Asian Americans become cast as the other, on the border of the majority and minority. Thus Asian American experiences contribute to the dialogue on race because their experiences are continually being used to define the relationships between other groups. How the other races perceived Asian Americans will in turn affect their situational relationships with and amongst each other. Any discussion about race and ethnicity must include Asian Americans; otherwise, their experiences become invalidated. For educators, it is difficult to offer an educational experience that truly benefits all students if an Asian American perspective is not considered, explored and assessed.

Understanding Asian American identity development requires understanding how these students construct their private realities in relation to their group identity. This type of research needs to consider how race and ethnicity provides a situational context that affects one's self-image. Societal beliefs behind one's race/ethnicity will affect the quality of interaction with others. As a result, society also forms unstated guidelines regarding expected behavior based on race. Each person is then shaped by his/her interpretation of these limits and by his/her reality. This environmental factor creates a public identity that can develop in opposition to the private self. These multiple selves need to examined from a fluid vantage point, rather than as unique entities. How individuals reconcile this tension that may arise continues to be an area ripe for further study.

## Appendix A

***Interview Protocol***

- Demographic information

  Age, year in school, high school attended, major, ethnicity, birthplace, parent's birthplace and immigration date, siblings
- How would you describe yourself?
- How would your friends describe you?
- How would you compare yourself to when you were in high school?
- How did you decide to attend UCLA?
- What were your initial expectations about college?
- How did you select your major?
- What are your career goals? How have they been influenced?
- How did you make friends at UCLA?
- How have your friends influenced your academic experiences?
- How have your friends influenced your social experiences?
- How do you see the term "Asian American?"

**References**

Applebaum, D. M. (1998). "The search for self: Identity formation among college art students of Mexican descent." Unpublished dissertation. University of California, Los Angeles.

Atkinson, D. Morten, G., and Sue, D. W. (1989). A minority identity development model. In Atkinson, D., Morten, G., and Sue, D. W. (Eds.), Counseling American minorities (pp. 35-52). Dubuque, IA: William C. Brown.

Bagasao, P. Y. (1989). Student voices breaking the silence: The Asian and Pacific American experience. Change, 21(6), 28-37.

Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). The dialogic imagination: Four essays by M. M. Bakhtin. (M. Holquist, Trans.). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Barringer, H. R., Takeuchi, D. T. and Xenos, P. (1990). Education, occupational prestige and income of Asian Americans. Sociology of Education, 63, 27-43.

Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2000). Interpersonal maturity: Integrating agency and communion. Journal of College Student Development, 41(2), 141-155.

Bogdan, R. C. and Biklen, S. K. (1998). Qualitative research in education: An introduction to theory and methods. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Brodkin, K. (1998). How Jews became white folks & what that says about race in America. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Chan, S. (1991). Asian Americans: An interpretative history. Boston: Twayne.

Chan, S. C. and Wang, L. (1991). "Racism and the Model Minority: Asian-Americans in higher education." In P. Altbach and K. Lomotey (Eds.), The racial crisis in

American higher education (pp. 43-67). Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.

Chang, R. S. (2000). Why we need a critical Asian American legal studies. In J. Wu and M. Song (Eds.), Asian American studies: A reader (pp. 363-378). New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

Chang, R. S. (1995). Toward an Asian American legal scholarship. In R. Delgado (Ed.), Critical race theory: The cutting edge (pp. 322-342). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Chickering, A. W. and Reisser, L. (1993). Education and identity (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Creswell, J. W. (1994). Research design: Qualitative and quantitative approaches. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Delgado, R. (Ed.). (1995). Critical race theory: The cutting edge. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., Shaw, L. L. (1995). Writing ethnographic fieldnotes. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Erikson, E. (1968). Identity: Youth and crisis. New York: Norton.

Hune, S. and Chan, K. S. (1997). "Special focus: Asian Pacific American demographic and educational trends." In D. J. Carter and R. Wilson (Eds.), Minorities in higher education (Vol. 15) (pp. 39-67). Washington D. C.: American Council on Education.

Kegan, R. (1982). The evolving self: Problem and process in human development. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Kibria, N. (1999). College and notions of "Asian American": Second generation Chines and Korean Americans negotiate race and identity. Amerasia Journal, 25 (1), 29-52.

Locke, L. F., Spirduso, W. W., and Silverman, S. J. (1993). Proposals that work (3rd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Marshall, C. and Rossman, G. B. (1999). Designing qualitative research (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

McAdams, D. P. (1993). The stories we live by. New York: William Morrow and Company.

Nakanishi, D. T. and Nishida, T. Y. (1995). The Asian American educational experience: A source book for teachers and students. London: Routledge.

Osajima, K. (1995). Racial politics and the invisibility of Asian Americans in higher education. Educational Foundations, 9(1), 35-53.

Pascarella, E. T. and Terenzini, P. T. (1991). How college affects students. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Riessman, C. K. (1993). Narrative analysis. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Swingewood, A. (1998). Cultural theory and the problem of modernity. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Tajfel, H. (1982). Social identity and intergroup relations. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Thai, H. C. (1999). Splitting things in half is so white!: Conceptions of family life and friendship and the formation of ethnic identity among second generation Vietnamese Americans. Amerasian Journal, 25(1), 53-88.

Wang, L. L. (1993). Trends in admissions for Asian Americans in colleges and universities: Higher education policy. The State of Asian Pacific America: Policy issues to the year 2020 (pp.49-59). Los Angeles: LEAP Asian Pacific American Public Policy Institute and UCLA Asian American Studies Center.

Wei, W. (1993). The Asian American Movement. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Yee, J. A. and Kuo, E. W. (2000). Bibliographic review essay: The experiences of Asian Pacific Americans in higher education. Journal of Asian American Studies, 3(1), 101-110.

Zhou, M. & Bankston, Carl, L. (1998). Growing up American: How Vietnamese children adapt to life in the United States. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.